

Counterculture, Capitalism, and the Constancy of Change<http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/891>

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In one of his final pieces of writing, Timothy Leary—one of the most singularly iconic and influential figures of the 1960s counterculture, known especially for his advocacy of a “molecular revolution” premised upon hallucinogenic self-medication—proposes that

[c]ounterculture blooms wherever and whenever a few members of a society choose lifestyles, artistic expressions, and ways of thinking and being that wholeheartedly embrace the ancient axiom that the only true constant is change itself. The mark of counterculture is not a particular social form or structure, but rather the evanescence of forms and structures, the dazzling rapidity and flexibility with which they appear, mutate, and morph into one another and disappear. (ix)

But it is not just radical activists and ancient philosophers who celebrate the constancy of change; on the contrary, it is a basic principle of post-industrial capitalism, a system which relies upon the constant extraction of surplus value—this being the very basis of the accumulation of capital—through an ever-accelerating creation of new markets and new desires fostered via a perpetual cycle of technical obsolescence and social destabilisation. Far from being unambiguously aligned with a mode of resistance then (as seemingly inferred by the quote above), the imperative for change would appear to be a basic constituent of that which the latter seeks to undermine. The very concept of “counterculture” as an ideal and a practice has been challenged and contested repeatedly over the past fifty or so years, both inside and outside of the academy. For the most part, the notion of counterculture is understood to have emerged out of the tumultuous cultural shifts of the 1960s, and yet, at the same time, as Theodore Roszak—who first coined the term—notes, the intellectual heritage of such a movement draws upon a “stormy Romantic sensibility, obsessed from first to last with paradox and madness, ecstasy and spiritual striving” (91) that dates back to nineteenth century Idealist philosophy and its critique of a rapidly industrialising civilisation.

My purpose in this paper is not to address these numerous conceptualisations of counterculture but instead to analyse specifically the enigmatic definition given by Leary above, whereby he conflates counterculture with the demand for continual change or novelty, arguing that the former appears precisely at the point when “equilibrium and symmetry have given way to a complexity so intense as to appear to the eye as chaos” (ix). Concerned that this definition is internally inconsistent given Leary’s understanding of counterculture as a profoundly *anti-capitalist* force, I will cursorily illustrate the contradictions that proceed when the notion of counterculture as resistance to capitalist hegemony is combined with the identification of counterculture as an authentic and repeated irruption of the new, albeit one that is inevitably domesticated by and subsumed into the dominant culture against which it is posed, as occurs in Leary’s account. The claim that I make here is that this demand for change as an end in itself is inextricably capitalist in its orientation, and as such, cannot be meaningfully understood as a structural externality to the capitalist processes that it strives to interrupt.

Capitalism and Growth

The study of counterculture is typically, and probably inevitably premised upon an opposition between a dominant culture and those emergent forces that seek to undermine it. In the words of Roszak, the American counterculture of the 1960s arose in defiance of the “modernizing, updating, rationalizing, planning” tendencies of technocracy, “that social form in which an

industrial society reaches the peak of its organizational integration" (5). Similarly, for Herbert Marcuse, the philosopher perhaps most closely associated with this counterculture, and whose writings formed the intellectual lynchpin of the student protest movement at that time, "intensified progress seems to be bound up with intensified unfreedom," and as a consequence, we must strive for "a non-repressive civilization, based on a fundamentally different experience of being, a fundamentally different relation between man [*sic*] and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations" (*Eros* 4-5).

In both cases, the dominant culture is associated with a particular form of repression, based upon the false sense of freedom imposed by the exigencies of the market. "Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom," argues Marcuse, "if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear" (*One-Dimensional* 10). Most importantly, Marcuse observes that this facile freedom of choice is propped up by processes of continual renewal, transformation, and rationalisation—"advertising, public relations, indoctrination, planned obsolescence"—operating on the basis of a "relentless utilization of advanced techniques and science," such that "a rising standard of living is the almost unavoidable by-product of the politically manipulated industrial society" (*One-Dimensional* 52-53). Writing at a time when the Keynesian welfare state was still a foregone conclusion, Marcuse denounces the way in which an increase in the quality of life associated with the rise of consumerism and lifestyle culture "reduces the use-value of freedom", for "there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the 'good' life" (*One-Dimensional* 53). The late industrial society, in other words, is presented as driven by a *repressive desublimation* which does not merely replace the objects of a so-called "high culture" with those of an inferior mass culture, but totally liquidates any such distinction, reducing all culture to a mere process of consumption, divorced from any higher goals or purposes.

This desublimation is able to maintain growth through the constant production of novelty—providing new objects for the purposes of consumption. This society is not stagnant then; rather, "[i]ts productivity and efficiency, its capacity to increase and spread comforts, to turn waste into need, and destruction into construction" all represent the demand for a continual production of the new that undergirds its own stability (*One-Dimensional* 11). This necessary dynamism, and the creative destruction that goes along with it, is a result of the basic laws of competition: the need not only to generate profit, but to maintain this profitability means that new avenues for growth must constantly be laid down. This leads to both a geographical expansion in search of new markets, and a psychological manipulation in order to cultivate needs, desires, and fantasies in consumers that they never knew they had, combined with a dramatic shift in the search for both raw materials and labour power toward the developing economies of Asia. The result, notes David Harvey, is to "exacerbate insecurity and instability, as masses of capital and workers shift from one line of production to another, leaving whole sectors devastated, while the perpetual flux in consumer wants, tastes, and needs becomes a permanent locus of uncertainty and struggle" (106). What we are seeing then, as these processes of production and demands for consumption accelerate, is not so much the maintenance of the comfortable and carefree life that Marcuse sees as destructive to culture; conversely, this acceleration is engendering a sense of disorientation and even groundlessness that leaves us in a state of continual anxiety and disquietude.

Although these processes have certainly accelerated in recent years—not least because of the rise of high-speed digital networking and telecommunications—they were prominent throughout the second-half of the twentieth century (in varying degrees), and indicate a general logic of rationalisation and technical efficiency that has been the focus of critique from the proto-countercultural romanticism of the nineteenth century onward. It is Marx who observes that "[t]he driving motive and determining purpose of capitalist production is the self-valorization of capital to the greatest possible extent," and it is precisely this seemingly unstoppable impetus toward accumulation that finds its most acute manifestation in our age of digital, post-industrial capitalism (449). What needs to be kept in mind is that capitalism is not opposed to those exteriorities that resist its logic; on the contrary, it is through its ability to appropriate them in a double movement whereby it simultaneously claims to act as the condition of their production

and claims the right to represent them on its terms (through the universal sign of money) that capitalism is able to maintain its continual growth. Put simply, capitalism as an economic system and an ideological constellation has proved itself time and time again to be remarkably resilient not only to intellectual critique, but also to the concrete production of new forms of living seemingly contrary to its principles, precisely because it is able to incorporate and thus nullify such threats. The production of the new does not harm capitalism; on the contrary, capitalism thrives on such production.

The odd contradiction of the mass society, writes Walter Benjamin, coheres in the way that “the novelty of products—as a stimulus to demand—is accorded an unprecedented importance,” whilst at the same time, “‘the eternal return of the same’ is manifest in mass production” (331). This production of novelty is, in other words, restricted by the parameters of the commodity form—the necessity that it be exchangeable under the terms of capital (as money)—such that its potential heterogeneity is restrained by its identity *as* a commodity. Capitalism is perfectly capable of creating new modes of living, but it does so specifically *according to its terms*. This poses a difficulty then for the study and advocacy of counterculture in the terms for which Leary advocates above, because the progressivism of the latter—referring to its demand for continual change and innovation (a demand that admittedly runs counter to the nostalgic romanticism that has motivated a great deal of countercultural thought and praxis, and is certainly not a universally accepted definition of counterculture more broadly)—is not necessarily easily distinguishable from the dominant culture against which it is counterposed.

Raymond Williams expresses this frustration well when he observes that “it is exceptionally difficult to distinguish between those which are really elements of some new phase of the dominant culture [...] and those which are substantially alternative or oppositional to it” (123). In other words, given that capitalism as an economic system and hegemonic cultural formation is so effective in producing the novelty that we crave—creating objects, ideas, and practices often vastly different to those residual traditions that preceded them—there is no obvious metric for determining when we are looking at a genuine alternative to this hegemony, and when we are looking at yet another variegated product of it. Williams makes a distinction here, whereby the emergence (in the strict sense of coming-into-being or *genesis*) of a new culture is presumed to be qualitatively different to mere novelty. What is not adequately considered is the possibility that this distinction is entirely illusory—that holding out hope for a *qualitatively different* mode of existence that will mark a distinct break from capitalist hegemony is in fact the chimera by which this hegemony is sustained, and its cycle of production perpetuated.

There is an anxiety here that is present within (and one might suggest even constitutive of) present-day debates over counterculture, particularly in regard to the question of resistance, and what form it might take under the conditions of late capitalism. From Williams’s perspective, it can be argued that “all or nearly all initiatives and contributions, even when they take on manifestly alternative or oppositional forms, are in practice tied to the hegemonic,” such that “the dominant culture, so to say, at once produces and limits its own forms of counter-culture” (114). To argue this though, he goes on to suggest, would:

overlook the importance of works and ideas which, while clearly affected by hegemonic limits and pressures, are at least in part significant breaks beyond them, which may again in part be neutralized, reduced, or incorporated, but which in their most active elements nevertheless come through as independent and original.
(114)

Authentic breaks in specific social conditions are not just a fantasy, he correctly observes, but have occurred many times across history—and not merely in the guise of violent revolutionary activity. What is needed, therefore, is the development of “modes of analysis which instead of reducing works to finished products, and activities to fixed positions, are capable of discerning, in good faith, the finite but significant openness of many actual initiatives and contributions”

For Williams, this openness is located chiefly within the semiotic indeterminacy of the artwork, and the resultant potentiality contained within it for individuals to develop resistant readings contrary to any dominant interpretation. These divergent readings become the sites upon which we might imagine new worlds and new ways of living. There is a sense of resignation in his solution though: an appeal to the autonomy of an artwork, and a momentary sublime glimpse of another world, that will inevitably be domesticated by capital. The difficulty that comes with understanding counterculture as an uncompromising demand for the new, over and against the mundane repetitions of commodity culture and lifestyle consumerism, is that it must reckon with the seemingly inevitable appropriation of these new creations by the system against which they are opposed. In such cases, the typical result is a tragic and fundamentally romantic defeatism, in which the creative individual (or community, etc.) must continue to create anew, knowing full well that their output will immediately find itself domesticated and enervated by the forces of capital. This specific conception of counterculture as perpetual change knows that it is doomed to failure, but takes pleasure in the struggle that nonetheless ensues.

The Subsumption of Counterculture

"Marx and Freud, perhaps, do represent the dawn of our culture," writes philosopher Gilles Deleuze, "but Nietzsche is something entirely different: the dawn of counterculture" (142). Friedrich Nietzsche seems like an unlikely candidate for the originator of counterculture—his writings certainly bear little overt resemblance to the premises of the various movements that emerged in the 1960s, even though, as Roszak remarks, these movements actually largely issued forth from "the work of Freud and of Nietzsche, the major psychologists of the Faustian soul" (91)—but what he does share with Leary is a belief, expressed most clearly in his posthumous text *The Will to Power* (1967), in the political and ethical power of *becoming*, and the need to celebrate and affirm, rather than resist, a world that appears to be in constant, ineluctable flux. Rather than seeking merely to improve the status quo, Nietzsche works toward total and perpetual upheaval—a transvaluation of all values. In Deleuze's words, he "made thought into a machine of war—a battering ram—into a nomadic force" (149).

At a time when resistance to capitalism seems futile; when the possibility of capitalism ending seems more and more distant (which is not to say that it is unlikely to end anytime soon, but merely that its plausible alternatives have been evacuated from the popular imagination), such a claim can seem rather appealing. But how might we distinguish this conception of perpetual revolution of values from the creative destruction of capitalism itself? Why do we presume that there is such a distinction to be made? Why should Leary's call for rapidity and flexibility—and more broadly, a celebration of change over constancy—be seen as anything other than an acknowledgement and reinforcement of capitalism's accelerating cycle of obsolescence? The uncomfortable reality we must consider is that the countercultural, as an *apparent* exteriority waiting to be appropriated, plays an essential role in the accumulation of capital that drives our economic system, and that accordingly, it cannot be plausibly understood as external to the structural conditions that it opposes. This is not to suggest that counterculture does not produce new possibilities, new opportunities, and new ways of living, but simply that its production is always already structured by capitalist relations—the precise anxiety acknowledged by Williams.

Once again, *this is not a dismissal of counterculture*, just the opposite in fact. It is a rejection of the *conflation* that Leary makes *between counterculture and novelty*, the combination of which is supposed to provide a potent threat to capitalist hegemony. "The naive supposition of an unambiguous development towards increased production," argues German philosopher Theodor Adorno, "is itself a piece of that bourgeois outlook which permits development because [...] it is hostile to qualitative difference" (156). Capitalism produces many different types of commodities (within which we can include ideas, beliefs, means of communication, as well as physical goods in the traditional sense), but what unites them is their shared identity under the regime of exchange value (money). This exchange value masks their genuine heterogeneity. But what use is it simply reassuring us that if we continue to produce, we may eventually produce

something *so new, so different* that it will evade capture by this logic? Does this not merely reinforce a complicity between the appeal of the countercultural as a force of change and the continuous accumulation of capital? I would contend that to define counterculture as the production of the new underwrites the inexhaustible productivism of the capitalist hegemony that it seeks to challenge.

What if, then, this qualitative difference was created not through the production of the new, but the total rejection of this production as the means to resistance? This would not be to engender or encourage a state of total stasis (which is definitely not a preferable or plausible scenario), but rather, to detach the hope for a better world from the idea that we must achieve this by somehow *adding* to the world that we already have—to recognise, as Adorno would have it, that “the forces of production are not the deepest substratum of man [*sic*], but represent his historical form adapted to the production of commodities” (156). Leary’s peculiar conception of counterculture that we have been examining throughout this paper refuses to give countenance to any kind of stability or equilibrium, instead proffering an essentially Nietzschean mode of resistance in which incessant creativity becomes the means to the contrivance of a new world—this is part of what Roszak records as the rejection of Marx’s “compulsive hard-headedness” and the embrace of “[m]yth, religion, dreams, visions” which mark the fundamental *romanticism* of (post-)1960s counterculture, and its heritage in nineteenth century bourgeois sensibilities. For all the benefits that such a conception of counterculture has provided, it would seem misguided to ignore the ways in which Leary’s rhetoric is undermined by the simple fact that it presumes a hierarchy between a dominant culture (capitalism) and its resistant periphery that is *already structured by and given through a capitalist mode of thought that presumes its own self-sufficiency* (that is, it assumes the adequacy of the logic of exchange to homogenise all products under the commodity form).

The postulate that grounds Leary’s understanding of counterculture is a covert identification of man/woman as a restless, alienated being who will never reach a state of stability or actualisation, and must instead continue to produce in the vain hope that this might finally and definitely change things for the better. Instead of embracing the constancy of change, an ideology that ends up justifying the excesses of a capitalist order that knows nothing other than production, perhaps it is possible to begin reconceptualising counterculture in terms that *resist* precisely this demand for novelty. As Alexander Galloway declares, “[i]t is time now to subtract from this world, not add to it,” for the “political does not arise from the domain of production” (138-139). We do not need more well-intentioned ideas regarding how the world could be a better place or what new possibilities are on offer—we know these things already, we hear about them every day. What we need, and what perhaps counterculture can offer, is to affirm the truth of that which does not need to be produced, which is always already given to us through the immanence of human thought. In the words of François Laruelle, this is an understanding of human individuals as *ordinary*, “stripped of qualities or attributes by a wholly positive sufficiency,” such that “they lack nothing, are not alienated,” whereby the identity of the individual “is defined by characteristics that are absolutely original, primitive, internal, and without equivalent in the World [...] not ideal essences, but finite, inalienable (and consequently irrecusable) lived experiences” (48-49). The job of counterculture then becomes not so much creating that which did not exist prior, but of realising “what we already know to be true” (Galloway 139).

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